



City of Biggs

Agenda Item Staff Report for the Regular City Council Meeting: August 16, 2010 6:00PM

DATE: August 12, 2010
TO: Honorable Mayor and Members of the City Council
FROM: Pete Carr, City Administrator
SUBJECT: Utility Shut-off Procedures (Discussion/Action)

City Staff will follow up on utility shut-off discussion from the August 9th special council meeting, providing policy change options as requested.

Background

Staff report was provided in August 9th packet.

Copy of letter from City to customer is attached for your information.

Council discussion acknowledged that staff is currently implementing shut-off procedures properly according to established municipal code. The question of whether to amend the code/policy to include direction to staff to make telephone notification to customers on shutoff day was discussed but not resolved.

Factors in support of the telephone practice:

- A telephone call could provide an additional alert to help a customer who was not aware from previous written notices of the impending shut-off.
- Telephone calls could be made utilizing city staff in person or the city's automated Connect-CTY system.
- Only about a half dozen customers are actually shut-off, although the final list is not known until shut-off time (12:00 noon).

Factors not supporting the telephone practice:

- Customers have already been notified in writing by invoice, then in writing by late-notice, then in writing by personally delivered notice to the front door. The late fee and interest are intended to cover staff time for the current process, not additional processes.
- It would be impractical to telephone all 48-hr final notice customers, typically some 150 in number, and most call recipients would have already paid their late bill paid or would be in the process of doing so.
- Most do settle their bill before the day of shutoff, many by depositing payment in the night slot at city hall. Staff is extremely busy 8-9am ascertaining which

customers have paid. Then the door is opened and 10-20 customers per hour are making cash payments. It is not known which customers actually need to be shut off until after 12:00 noon.

- Delaying the shutoff task to allow time for telephone calls and possible responses would reduce the open office hours time shut-off customers have to pay their bill and get service restored before the close of business.
- Many customers have not provided telephone numbers to the city. Many have changed or deleted the phone numbers they once had on file (25% of American homes now have no land line). Many customers would not be home to receive the call, would have the call answered by a child, would not pick up, or would have calls go to a voice message recording device.
- Personal phone calls would be inconsistent depending who is making the call.
- Responses from telephoned customers can be expected to be unpleasant, argumentative, and worse. Customers may perceive last-minute calls as harassment and threatening.
- In short, staff advises that telephone calls are unnecessary and would likely be ineffective and counter-productive.

Recommendation

Continue shut-off policy/practice as currently established.

Fiscal Impact

Cost of making telephone calls would be a minor staff expense.

City could not be expected to recover additional bad debt non-payments.

CITY OF BIGGS

465 C STREET
P.O. BOX 307
BIGGS, CALIFORNIA 95917
TELEPHONE (530) 868-5493



August 12, 2010

Jody Villapania
2932 Third Street
PO Box 1129
Biggs, CA 95917

Dear Ms. Villapania:

I am writing to respond to the correspondence you provided to the City August 9th related to utility shut-off practices. Your letter was read to the City Council as you requested and discussed in a public meeting that evening.

The City Council considered the City's current utility shut-off practices and determined that current practice is consistent with long-established City policy per the Biggs Municipal Code and subsequent City Council meeting decisions. Your case was handled by the City consistent with this policy and as applied city-wide.

I also want to respond to some of the information in your letter and provide more understanding of the city's practices.

- o Meters are read on the 15th of each month. Bills are issued to arrive at the customer's mailing address on or about the 1st, with payment due on the 10th.
- o As noted on bills, late charges start when the bill becomes delinquent – on the 21st.
- o Shut-off of utility service is scheduled for 15 days later. The date is adjusted out (more time for the customer) if it falls on a Friday, Saturday, Sunday or holiday. Shut-off, then, is always at least 25 days after the bill is due, at least 35 days after the bill is mailed to the customer, and at least a full 50 days after the use of the utility service being billed.
- o Shut-off notices clearly indicate in English and Spanish ways to inquire or make payment, the date and time of scheduled shut-off, and resources available to help avoid shut-off if payment cannot be made. Final notices are hand-delivered to front doors.
- o City field utility workers are not provided confidential information about customers' accounts, nor are they authorized to make exceptions; they are instructed to do their jobs directly and professionally and without delay.
- o City field workers wear orange shirts embroidered prominently with "City of Biggs," and their first names. They drive clearly marked white city vehicles. In your case, there were multiple shut-offs in one neighborhood so the worker parked in front of one residence and walked to the others.

- City field utility workers do not seek interaction with customers at shut-off as the response is often very negative, but they do greet and introduce themselves and mention why they are there if they happen to interact with a customer. They do not normally approach children, especially to discuss utility customer business. In your case, a teenage boy was observed on a bicycle in front of the residence after the power had been shut-off; there would have been no good reason for the utility worker to assume this was the utility customer.
- You mentioned that "living in a small town like Biggs that one would be treated like an individual..." I would ask for you to consider that a small utility is less able to absorb the losses from bad debts than would be a large utility. Unpaid bills by one customer are borne by paying customers with more impact in a small population base than in a large one. Also, inconsistency in administration is a far greater problem than consistency. In Biggs, our objective is to provide excellent service at the lowest cost rate we can, and to do so in a professional and reasonably courteous way. We do provide personal and prompt service, but we would be doing our customers a disservice if we failed to act consistently.

You also mentioned in your letter that you reported a water leak on the morning of Friday, August 6th that was not fixed until Monday, August 9th. Please note:

- A minor water leak is not an emergency. The City's arrival to inspect the leak later the same day it was reported is acceptable service.
- The utility worker's report indicates that he offered to repair your leak at that time but you asked him to not do so as you had many children at home and did not want the water shut off temporarily at that time. He offered to return Monday and felt he had your agreement that this would be satisfactory to you.
- Your account will not be billed for metered usage this month to avoid your being charged for water leakage at the valve box. We hope you feel this is fair. This is consistent with how all customers are treated in Biggs.

I appreciate your feedback directly to the city. This provides us an opportunity to enhance our understanding of customers' concerns, and to help customers understand the City's policies and practices. We welcome public input.

I hope your future experiences with our City are more enjoyable. Please feel free to contact me at 868-0100 with any concerns.


 Peter R. Carr
 City Administrator

Cc: City Council